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## ABSTRACT

To investigate teachers' parent involvement practices and their effect on children, a study of teachers and parents of students in the first, third, and fifth grades was conducted in 82 elementary schools across 16 school districts in Maryland. A total of 36 teachers who strongly emphasized parent involvement in home activities and 46 teachers who did not were surveyed about their attitudes toward, and techniques for, promoting involvement and about factors they perceived as influencing parent participation. Teachers in different school districts emphasized different types of parent involvement. Urban teachers used home learning techniques and conducted more workshops for parents at school. Suburban teachers frequently used parents as classroom volunteers. Rural teachers conducted more home visits. Responding to questionnaires, most parents indicated they were never involved at school; a large percentage of parents did not receive basic, traditional communications from school to home, such as notes, conversations, phone calls, or conferences with teachers. Parents' experience with techniques teachers use to involve parents in learning activities with their children at home was found to vary from frequent interaction with specified learning activities to no involvement. Findings suggest that optimal programs for parents result from teachers' frequent involvement of parents in learning activities at home. (BJD)

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# STUDY OF TEACHER PRACTICES OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT: RESULTS FROM SURVEYS OF TEACHERS AND PARENTS

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Summary  
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Parent involvement in their children's education is recognized as being generally beneficial. Many studies have shown clearly and consistently that parents who encourage and support their children's school efforts give those children an advantage in school. Few studies have tried to identify the kinds of parent involvement that help children most. Because parent involvement is important, we need to ask whether teachers can mobilize that involvement, especially among parents who might not help on their own.

At the Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools, we designed a study to increase knowledge about the types of parent involvement that teachers use and their effects. We conducted surveys of teachers, principals, parents and students in the first, third, and fifth grades in 600 elementary schools in 16 districts in Maryland. About 3700 teachers and their principals were surveyed. Then we identified and interviewed 36 teachers who strongly emphasized parent involvement in learning activities at home and 46 teachers who had similar backgrounds and classrooms but who did not emphasize parent involvement. The parents of students in these 82 teachers' classrooms were surveyed about their attitudes and experiences with parent involvement. In this report we briefly review results from the survey of teachers and summarize results from the survey of parents.

## REVIEW OF SURVEY OF TEACHERS: WHAT TEACHERS SAY AND DO

Teachers were asked about their attitudes toward parent involvement, their routine communications with parents, and their emphasis, prac-

tices, experiences and opinions concerning parent involvement in learning activities at home.

## Attitudes Toward Parent Involvement

Teachers agreed on two points: parent involvement can help solve problems faced by schools, and parent involvement in the classroom helps increase involvement in learning activities at home. But opinions were split about 50-50 on whether teachers can actually influence parents to help their children at home; whether most parents are actually able to help their children with reading and math problems; whether it is fair to ask parents to spend time in the evenings to help their children with school-related activities; and whether parents want to know more about the school curriculum than they are usually told. Teachers believe that parent involvement is a good idea in general, but many teachers run into difficult problems when they try to implement parent involvement practices.

## Most Used Techniques

Teachers were asked about their use of 14 specific techniques that involve parents in learning activities at home with their children. They reported widespread use of three techniques that stress reading and books: having parents read to the child or listen to the child read; asking parents to take their child to the library, and loaning books and teaching materials to parents for use with children at home. Other techniques included discussions, informal learning activities (such as playing family games or using common household items to teach skills), con-

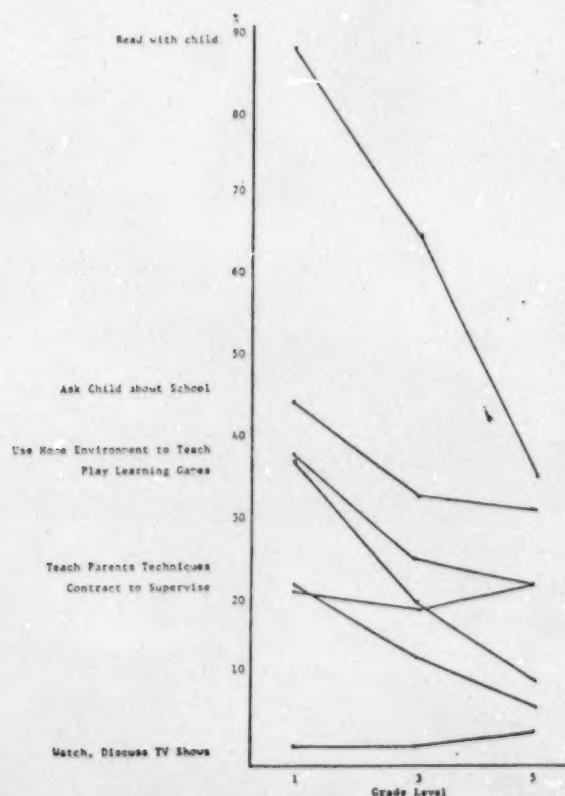
tracts for supervising projects, and teaching parents how to tutor, teach, or make learning materials for use at home with their children. Most teachers use parent involvement practices occasionally; most use parent involvement techniques only with some parents. Only a few teachers use many parent involvement techniques intensively as part of their regular teaching practice.

### Influences on the Use of Parent Involvement

Several factors influenced some teachers more than others to use parent involvement activities.

(a) Grade level taught influenced the use of parent involvement activities. Teachers of younger children were more likely to involve parents in most of the 14 techniques in our survey. Figure 1 shows how activities changed in grades 1, 3 and 5. Teachers' use of reading activities declined the most over the elementary school years. The use of informal learning activities and teaching

Figure 1. Percent of Teachers Making Active Use of Parent Involvement Techniques, by Grade Level



parents how to teach or tutor also decreased from grades 1 to 5. On the other hand, contracts, TV-based discussions, and other parent-child discussions were used about equally -- but rarely -- at all grade levels. Grade level remained the most important influence on teachers' use of learning activities at home, even after other characteristics of teachers, students, parents, and schools were statistically accounted for.

(b) Teachers' beliefs influenced their use of parent involvement activities. Teachers who strongly believed that they can influence parents to conduct home learning activities use parent involvement techniques more than other teachers, as shown in Figure 2. They emphasized especially using informal learning activities and teaching parents how to teach, tutor or make materials for specific academic skills.

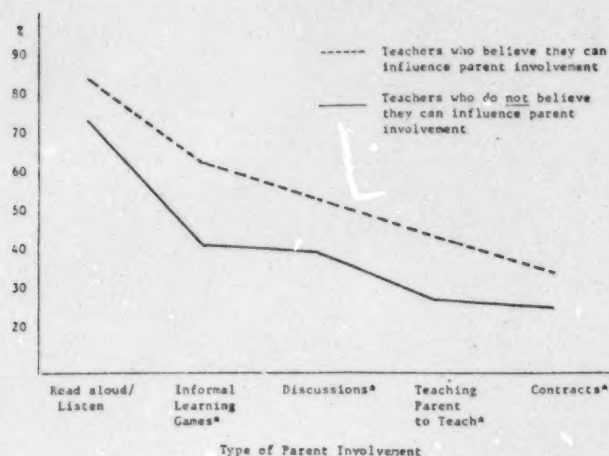
The asterisks on the graph next to the types of parent involvement indicate that teachers who were confirmed by their principals as "leaders" in parent involvement used some techniques significantly more frequently than did other teachers.

(c) The education of the parents of their students affected the way teachers thought about and used parent involvement. Some teachers of children from less educated families believed that only well-educated parents could really help their children at home. They felt that parents were unwilling or unable to help their children on learning activities at home. Other teachers who were frequent users of parent involvement practices had developed systems to involve all parents -- not just the well-educated.

### Differences Across Districts

Teachers in different school districts emphasized particular types of parent involvement. The teachers in the urban district in the sample used home learning techniques, conducted more workshops for parents at school, and had more positive attitudes about parent involvement, on the average, than did teachers in other districts.

Figure 2. Percent of Teachers Making Active Use of Parent Involvement Techniques, by Teachers' Beliefs about Their Influence



\* Indicates that teachers who were confirmed by their principals as leaders in parent involvement used this technique significantly more often than did other teachers.

Teachers in a large suburban district more frequently used parent volunteers in the classroom. One rural district's teachers conducted more home visits with parents than did teachers in other districts. These results suggest that district level policies may enable, encourage, and reward teachers to emphasize particular types of parent involvement.

### Problems and Possibilities

Teachers pointed out that parental involvement in learning activities at home puts demands on teacher, parent, and student time. Some teachers expressed concerns about their inability to require parental participation, the stress on children and parents that results from ineffective tutoring, teachers' fears of parents and parents' fears of teachers, the need for families to develop children's social and emotional skills, and other problems. Other teachers noted positive results they had observed in their parent involvement programs, including students' better basic skills, more useful parent-student interactions, more parent-teacher cooperation, improved parent self-esteem, and other benefits. The examples suggest that successful parent involvement programs are not easy to institute, but they can be

organized in ways that may benefit students, parents, and teachers.

### SUMMARY OF SURVEY OF PARENTS: WHAT PARENTS SAY AND DO

#### Characteristics of Parents

About 1270 parents of elementary school children responded to a questionnaire on their reactions to and experiences with teacher practices of parent involvement. The teachers of these parents' children put different emphases on parent involvement. Some of the teachers were recognized by the principal for their leadership in the use of parent involvement; others were not officially recognized for their leadership by the principal but used parent involvement practices frequently; still others used few if any parent involvement techniques.

About 60% of the parents in the 82 classrooms mailed questionnaires back to the researchers for inclusion in this study. The characteristics of the sample were diverse. Parents differed by grade level (with parents of children in the first, third and fifth grades), race (with 36% black), educational background (with equal numbers of parents with few, average and many years of education), and family and work status (with 24% single parents, 43% full-time and 18% part-time working mothers).

#### Parents' Reactions and Experiences

Parents were asked about their general attitudes toward the public schools and teachers, their involvement at school, and their involvement in learning activities at home. We were especially interested in how parents' reactions and experiences differed based on the extent to which the teacher emphasized parent involvement.

#### Attitudes in General

Parents' attitudes toward their children's public elementary schools and teachers were remarkably positive. Over 90% felt their child's

school was well run and that the homework assigned was appropriate and useful; about 85% said that they and the teachers had the same goals for the child. Most parents (77%) characterized their interactions with teachers as "cooperative," but many (over 40%) did not feel "respect" or "warmth" in their relations with teachers. Despite their generally positive attitudes, parents reported that teachers could do more to involve them in learning activities at home.

### Involvement at School

The visibility and interaction of some parents at school seem to encourage teachers to ask them and other parents to conduct learning activities at home. This positive effect, however, is dampened by the survey findings that most parents were never involved at school. From the survey of parents we learned:

- o About 70% of the parents never helped the teacher in the classroom or on class trips.
- o About 88% never assisted in the library, cafeteria or other school areas.
- o About 70% never participated in the administration of fund raising activities for the school.

Most parents cannot or do not become involved at school. Over 40% of the mothers in this sample worked full time and 18% worked part time. Even the active parents participated infrequently at school. The average number of days per year involved at school were:

- o 4.1 days helping the teacher and class
- o 3.5 days helping in the school cafeteria, offices, library
- o 7.0 days helping in fund raising activities

Only about 4% of the respondents (51 parents in 82 classrooms) were very active, spending more than 25 days

per year at the school or on school business.

### School-to-Home Communications

All schools send basic information home to families about school schedules and report card grades. Some schools and teachers do more than others in routinely communicating with families about their children's school behaviors, attitudes, accomplishments, and activities. In the Maryland sample, about 16% of the parents said they received no memos from their child's teacher, over 35% had no parent-teacher conference, and about 60% never spoke to the teacher on the phone. Table 1 shows that fewer parents received the kinds of personal communications and opportunities for interaction that required more of the teachers' or parents' time. Surprisingly large numbers of parents were excluded from some of the most basic, traditional communications from the school -- such as notes, conversations, phone calls, or conferences with teachers.

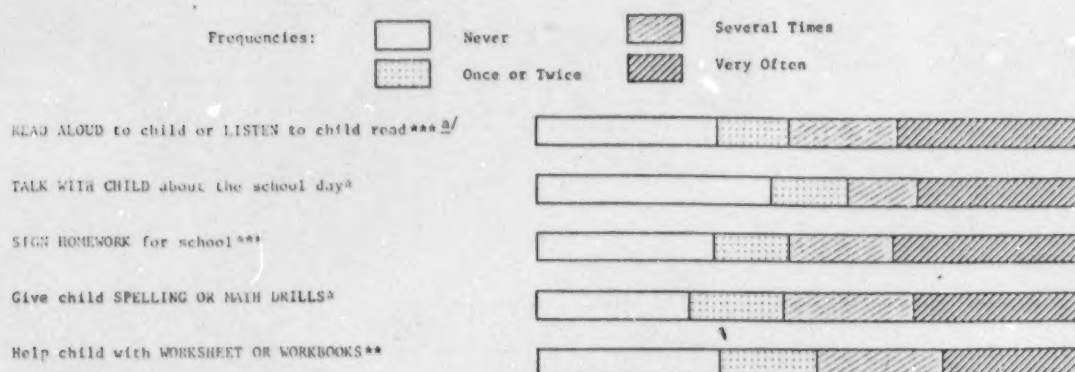
Table 1. Percent of Parents who Never Experienced Personal Communications from Child's Teacher During the Year

|                                        | <u>% Never</u> |
|----------------------------------------|----------------|
| Memo from teacher                      | 16.4           |
| Talk to teacher before or after school | 20.7           |
| Conference with teacher                | 36.4           |
| Handwritten note from teacher          | 36.5           |
| Workshop at school                     | 59.0           |
| Called on phone by teacher             | 59.5           |
| Visited at home by teacher             | 96.3           |

### Involvement at Home

Parents were asked about the frequency of their experiences with twelve techniques that teachers use to involve parents in learning activities at home. As in the survey of teachers, these were grouped under five categories: (a) techniques that involve reading and books; (b) techniques that encourage discussions between parents and children; (c) techniques based on informal activities and games that use common materials at home; (d) techniques based on formal contracts and supervision

Figure 3. Parents' Reports of Frequency of Requests from Teachers for Five Most-Used Parent Involvement Techniques



<sup>a/</sup> indicates more parents report frequent use of these techniques by teachers who were confirmed leaders in the use of parent involvement; \*\*\* = one chance in a thousand, \*\* = one chance in a hundred, \* = five chances in a hundred that differences in parents' reports occurred by chance.

among parents, teachers, and children; and (e) techniques that involve tutoring and teaching the child in skills and drills.

### Most Frequent Requests to Parents

Parents most frequently experienced five parent involvement activities, as shown in Figure 3. Over one-fourth of the parents said they were asked very often to read aloud or listen to the child read, talk with the child about the events of the school day, give spelling or math drills, give help on worksheets or workbooks, and sign the child's homework. The frequent involvement of some parents in these techniques is countered by the fact that from one-fourth to two-fifths of the parents were never asked to conduct the five most frequently used activities.

### Requests from Teacher-Leaders vs. Other Teachers

Asterisks next to the techniques listed in Figure 3 indicate that teachers who were considered leaders in parent involvement differed from other teachers in the use of these techniques. Teacher-leaders made significantly more frequent requests of parents of nine of the twelve parent involvement practices. These included the five most frequently used practices -- reading, discussing, giving drills and practice,

helping on worksheets, signing homework -- and four other techniques -- taking the child to the library, playing learning games, using things at home to teach, and visiting the classroom to learn how to teach. There were no significant differences in parents' reports about teacher-leader vs. other teachers' use of the three least-used practices -- borrowing books, entering contracts, and using TV for learning.

### Effects on Parents

Table 2 summarizes some of the effects on parents of teacher practices of parent involvement. Parents were asked several questions about how they understood and evaluated their child's school and teacher. Parents with children in the classrooms of teachers who frequently used home learning activities were more likely than other parents to report that:

- they recognized that the teacher worked hard to interest parents in the instructional program;
- they received most ideas for home involvement from the teachers;
- they felt that they should help their children at home;
- they understood more this year than last about what

Table 2  
Summary of Significant Effects on Parents of  
Four Types of Teacher Leadership in the Use of Parent Involvement

| TEACHER LEADERSHIP                              | PARENTS SAY THEY: |             |           |                         |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------|-----------|-------------------------|
|                                                 | GET MORE IDEAS    | SHOULD HELP | KNOW MORE | EVALUATE TEACHER HIGHER |
| Teachers' REPUTATION for Leadership             | *                 | --          | --        | *                       |
| Actual Use Parent Involvement PRACTICES at Home | **                | **          | **        | **                      |
| Other School-to Home COMMUNICATIONS             | --                | --          | *         | **                      |
| Use of PARENTS AT SCHOOL                        | --                | --          | --        | --                      |

a/ \* = independent effect significant at .05 level; \*\* = independent effect significant at or beyond .01 level; NS = not significant effect; N = 82 classrooms.

b/ The effects marked with \* were significant after taking into account grade level, principals' ratings of teacher quality, teachers' highest degree, performance level of students, racial composition of students, and parents' education, all at the classroom level.

their child was being taught in school;

- they were more positive about the teacher's interpersonal skills;
- they rated the teacher higher in overall teaching ability;

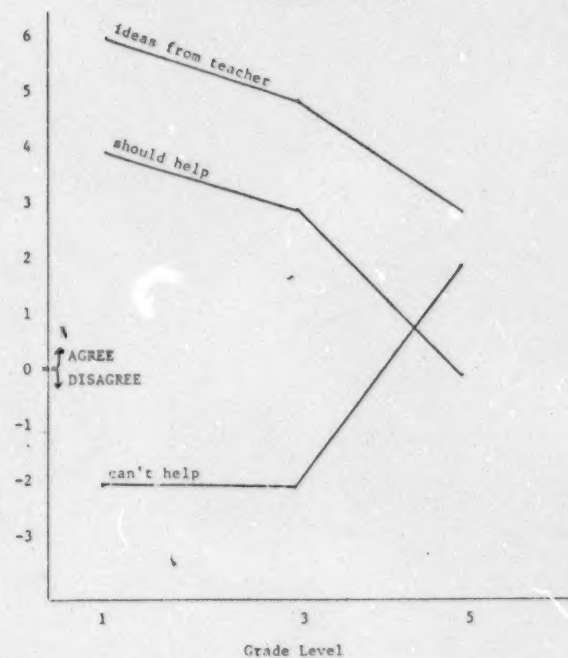
Table 2 shows that other measures of parent involvement -- such as the principal's estimates of teacher leadership, parental assistance at the school, or the teacher's use of other routine communications to the family did not have the same strong, consistent effects on parents as did parents' experiences with frequent involvement in learning activities at home.

### The Importance of Grade Level

Grade level was as important in the reports from parents as it was in the reports from teachers. Parents with children in lower elementary grades reported significantly more frequent use of parent involvement, more frequent communications from the teacher to the family, and more frequent participation by parent volunteers at the school.

Parents with children in grades 1, 3, and 5 had different views about

Figure 4. How Child's Grade Level Changes Parent Experiences with Parent Involvement at Home



participation in parent involvement activities. Parents of older elementary children reported more often that they did not have enough training to help their children in reading and math activities at home, as shown in Figure 4. They reported that they helped their children, but they also said that they felt less confident about helping. This inadequacy was expressed by parents who had few, average, or many years of education. Figure 4 also shows that parents of older children were significantly less likely to agree that they received ideas from the teacher or that they should help the child on learning activities at home.

In the upper elementary grades, then, there was less use by teachers of parent involvement practices and less confidence in parents of their ability to help their children. Because teachers use fewer home learning activities in the upper grades, parents' repertoires of helping skills tend to taper off or disappear as the child progresses through school. Parents may know less and less about how to help their children, even though older children are often in need of extra help in order to stay on grade level in specific skills.

Other data revealed that when teachers at all grade levels involve parents frequently in home learning activities, they can positively affect the attitudes and evaluations of parents.

### Effects of Parents' Education

In teacher-leader classrooms, parents at all educational levels report frequent parent involvement. In other teachers' classrooms, parents with fewer years of formal schooling report more frequent requests than do other parents to help their child at home. Teachers who are not leaders in parent involvement use significantly fewer techniques than teacher-leaders with well-educated parents. Teacher-leaders seem to conduct more equitable programs, reaching all or most parents as part of their regular teaching strategy. Other teachers may not involve parents whose children are doing well in school. Their selective use of parent involvement, however, is more often built on negative expectations of a parent's, and possibly a child's, ability to succeed.

### What Should, Can, Do and Could Parents Do at Home?

Should parents help? They think they should help if teachers give them learning activities to do at home with their children.

Can parents help? They say they can help if they have more education or if their children are in the lower elementary grades where less specialized knowledge is needed to help the children.

Do parents help? Despite differences in their feelings about whether they should help or can help with homework, most parents do help. Only 8% of the parents reported they never helped their child with reading and math skills during the school year, whether or not they were asked to do so by the teacher.

Could parents help? Most parents reported that they could help more if the teacher showed them what to do.

These differences in parental responses suggest how educators could organize programs of parent involvement to meet specific objectives. For example, organizing a program of frequent learning activities at home will let parents know that they should help. Organizing and conducting workshops for parents will show them how they can help. Parents of older students may need especially clear and sequential guidance from teachers in order to build and maintain confidence about helping their children. Parents do help whether teachers ask them or not and could help more or more effectively. Teachers may find benefits in channeling this unsolicited assistance into helpful activities that advance the goals of the school instructional program and the learning and development of the children.

### Informing Policies of Parent Involvement

Policies about parent involvement often involve choices between emphasis on parent involvement at school or parent involvement at home. The data from our surveys of parents and teachers suggest that both types of involvement have some benefits. From teachers we learned that having parents at school helps teachers feel more comfortable about asking other parents to help their children with learning activities at home. These effects are modest, however, and many other factors influence teachers' uses of parent involvement. From parents we learned that the frequent use of parent involvement at home has consistent, important effects on parents. They feel more involved in the education of their children and recognize the efforts and merits of teachers.

Thus information from both teachers and parents suggests that the best programs will give parents multiple roles at school and at home to maximize the positive effects of parent involvement on teachers and on parents. But, if schools or families had to choose only one policy to stress, these results suggest that the most payoff for the most parents comes from teachers' frequent and

organized practices of parent involvement in learning activities at home.

Teachers need not be concerned that involving parents is going to upset the parents or make them think less of the teacher's abilities. The responses in this survey show that from the parents' point of view, the teachers who involve them in their children's learning at home are better teachers.

Two messages are clearly carried by this survey. First, almost all parents support the idea of being involved in their children's learning at home. Second, many parents help their children with or without teacher directions, and many would benefit from and welcome ideas and guidance from the teacher about what

to do and how to do it.

### Future Reports

How good and how important is the help children receive at home from parents? In future reports we will use data collected from teachers, principals, parents, and students in the 82 classrooms to study whether teacher practices of parent involvement and different homework policies affect children's attitudes and achievements. We will be checking, also, to see if single and married parents are similarly involved in learning activities at home. And, we will be working with teachers and parents to develop programs for other teachers who would like to try to put an organized sequence of parent involvement activities into their teaching practice.

We are very grateful to the families who participated in this survey and to the teachers and principals who helped us contact the children's families. Studies of schools and families require the kinds of cooperative efforts and understanding that we received from the participating schools and communities.

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